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John Ghazvinian. *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021. ISBN: 9780307271815 (hardcover, \$37.50); 9780307472380 (paperback, \$18.00).

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Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY GREGORY BREW, YALE UNIVERSITY

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Whenever I am asked where one might begin the study of U.S.-Iranian relations, I generally suggest James Bill's classic study *The Eagle and the Lion*.<sup>1</sup>

Now over thirty years old, Bill's book covers the period from 1941 to 1979, is chiefly concerned with political and strategic matters, and lacks the finer detail afforded by declassification. It is hardly the only study of its subject: monographs on the relationship between Iran and the United States abound, from studies of the wartime occupation to those concerned with the Mosaddeq crisis, the Cold War alliance with the Pahlavi shah, the Islamic Revolution, hostage crisis, and subsequent decades-long confrontation in which Tehran and Washington remain embroiled.<sup>2</sup> Yet Bill's book remains the *sine qua non* for understanding why two nations which had enjoyed an amicable, even close relationship came to such an entrenched state of suspicion, distrust, and antagonism.

John Ghazvinian's *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present* is an attempt at a comprehensive account of U.S.-Iranian relations. A hefty tome, *America and Iran* covers everything in Bill's *Eagle and the Lion* and much else besides. It begins in the eighteenth century and documents the centuries' long relationship between the United States and Iran. While ostensibly focusing on a bilateral relationship, the book serves as a highly readable summary of Iranian history from the Qajar era to the present day. Written with verve, wit, and an evident sense of the dramatic, *America and Iran* is an engaging read, albeit one occasionally weighed down by its immense scope.

Ghazvinian's stated goal is to bridge the divide separating Iranians and Americans, "a gulf of understanding" which he contends is the chief barrier to improving relations (xiv). Writing for an audience of general readers rather than policy practitioners or academics—though both groups may find the book useful, particularly the later chapters—Ghazvinian seeks to enlighten his audience as to the complex nature of U.S.-Iranian relations that goes well beyond the animosity of the post-revolution, post-hostage crisis era.

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> A sampling includes James F. Goode, *The United States and Iran, 1946-51: the Diplomacy of Neglect* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), and Goode, *The United States and Iran: in the Shadow of Mosaddeq* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), Richard Cottam, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), Mary Ann Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood: the United States, Great Britain and Iranian Oil, 1950-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), David Collier, *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran, 1941-1979* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017) Ben Offiler, *US Foreign Policy and the Modernization of Iran: Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and the Shah* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Ghazvinian argues that Iran and America are natural friends. “Both countries have occasionally made decisions that seem beastly and reprehensible,” he writes, “but they have done so as a result of peculiar historical circumstances” (xvii). Addressing both the United States and the Iran as historical actors driven by specific interests, Ghazvinian seeks to add context while simultaneously suggesting that “history can be a force for peace,” with understanding eventually leading to rapprochement at the state level (xvii).

The ambitious *raison d'être* laid out in Ghazvinian's introduction prepares the reader for a whirlwind journey through three-hundred years of history. Drawing on the broad historiography covering the Qajar, Pahlavi, and contemporary eras, Ghazvinian gives readers a survey of Iran's evolution from early-modern empire to modern nation-state to Islamic republic, highlighting throughout its interactions with America and Americans.

He splits his book into four parts, following the seasons of a year. While the ‘Spring’ and ‘Summer’ spanning the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century were marked by friendship, the CIA-backed coup of 1953 brought on an ‘Autumn’ in U.S.-Iranian relations, one which slid into ‘Winter’ with the Islamic Revolution and 1979-1980 hostage crisis.

The book really shines in its early chapters. Ghazvinian is a lively and engaging writer, and his deep and creative archival explorations unearth fascinating elements in Iran's relationship with the United States between 1720 and 1900. Americans were first aware of Iran, or ‘Persia’ as it was still broadly known, through newspapers that positioned the “noble, courageous, civilized” Persians as a foil for the “tyrannical, savage, incurably evil” Ottoman Turks (13).

Further encounters came through Presbyterian missionaries who dreamed of converting Iran's Christians to American Protestantism, or through amateur diplomats like Samuel Greene Wheeler Benjamin. While noting the possibility of cooperation, Ghazvinian also highlights the theme of misunderstanding. Iranians eager for American friendship found ignorance and incomprehension: Persia was simply not a high priority for the United States. When interest in Iran did spike in the twentieth century, it stemmed from a desire to secure overseas oil deposits, leading Ghazvinian to suggest that the “great unspoken rivalry” between the United States and Great Britain that was inspired by the “competition...for Iran's vast petroleum bounty” served as the “backdrop to many of the most important and transformative events in modern Iranian history” (99).

Ghazvinian never fully explains the full implication of his assertion, though the matter of oil necessarily looms large over his account of Iran's experiences during World War II and the postwar period. The Cold War tends to dominate historians' account of this era. Though frequently alluded to within Ghazvinian's narrative, the full ideological and strategy context of the Cold War is somewhat lost in the book's rapid-fire narrative of Iran's modern history. Offering a host of details on Iran's domestic politics—readers are taken through the Constitutional Revolution, the ascendancy of Reza Shah, and the “Tehran Spring” of the 1940s, to name just a few—Ghazvinian's narrative occasionally loses track of *why*, exactly, the United States was so concerned with Iran after 1941. As a chronicle of events, *America and Iran* is wonderfully compelling and rich. But as a thesis on the nature of U.S.-Iranian relations in the twentieth century, the book sometimes misses the forest for the trees.

This leads to some curious omissions. While Ghazvinian spends time describing the misbehavior of American soldiers in Iran during World War II, he only briefly mentions U.S. advisory missions and does not mention at all the activities of American oil companies—a strange choice, as he previously emphasizes the importance of Anglo-American competition over Iranian oil. More curiously, Ghazvinian offers only a few paragraphs on the Azerbaijan crisis of 1946-1947, which scholars regard both as a turning point in U.S.-Iranian relations and an early episode of the Cold War (139-140).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Important works on the Azerbaijan crisis include Louise L'Estrange Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), Mark H. Lytle, *The Origins of the Iranian-American Alliance, 1941-1953* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987). While Ghazvinian rightfully emphasizes the importance of

The book offers a full discussion of Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq, the 1951 oil nationalization, and the 1953 coup. Here the narrative is effective though somewhat simplistic, exaggerating the degree of disagreement between the United States and Great Britain over Iran's nationalization. While it is certainly true that U.S. officials found British attitudes stubborn and obstructive (178-9), Ghazvinian does not discuss American determination to prevent the success of Iran's nationalization, for fear that it would weaken the position of American oil companies elsewhere. The American position was far closer to the British than Ghazvinian's account would imply, though he rightfully notes that the U.S. government doubted whether a coup against Mosaddeq could succeed in late 1952, changing its viewpoint several months later after a new administration had come into office (189).

At times the book's epic scope works against it. Ghazvinian deals at length with Iran's last shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, offering a largely negative characterization of a monarch who was "[p]rideful, insecure, plagued by demons.... never more at home than when he was basking in the praise of his American friends," a leader whose loyalty to the United States "was beyond dispute" (7, 253). As the book proceeds past the events of 1978, however, the Shah slips away entirely—his death is treated as an after-thought and mentioned halfway down a paragraph on page 340. By the time one reaches the post-revolutionary period, any talk of Qajars, Mosaddeq, or the Shah disappears, as the reader is instead asked to grapple with an entirely different set of issues, ranging from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the battle between moderates, conservatives, and radicals inside the Islamic Republic. One gets little sense of how previous chapters connect to the analysis of more contemporary issues.

Though it is broken into four parts, nearly half of the book is concerned with the last forty years, what Ghazvinian calls the 'Winter' of the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Ghazvinian devotes long sections to the revolution of 1978-1979 and the fall of the Shah—whose twenty-five years in power receive roughly the same amount of coverage as the nuclear negotiations of the 1990s and 2000s—while subsequent chapters detail the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, the economic liberalization and reform movement of the 1990s, and the nuclear controversy.

The final two chapters are dedicated to an exploration of Iran's nuclear program—the most prevalent issue in contemporary U.S.-Iranian relations and clearly a topic which Ghazvinian regards with particular interest. His breakdown of Iran's strategic rationale for developing nuclear technologies and considerations for why (and why not) a nuclear weapon program served Iranian interests is one of the book's strongest passages. His final chapter tackles the Obama era and the lead-up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal) offering an engrossing account of the last ten years of U.S.-Iranian relations.

An element that is sure to attract attention is Ghazvinian's emphasis on Israel. In assessing why the United States and Iran have been unable to settle their ongoing animosity, Ghazvinian leans heavily on the idea that Israeli pressure and lobbying maintained bilateral animus, suggesting that Israel conspired to poison U.S.-Iranian efforts at rapprochement repeatedly between 1990 and 2015 (389, 395, 426-427, 484-486). Ghazvinian cites documents made available through WikiLeaks, contemporary reporting in English and Farsi, and a range of secondary sources to back up his argument.

Ghazvinian's focus on Israeli influence and agency occasionally diverts attention away from American actors who were equally important to maintaining U.S.-Iranian antagonism. There was a large community of politicians and policymakers in the United States who viewed Iran with intense distrust and skepticism, rendering efforts at diplomacy, from the Picco mission of the early 1990s to the Grand Bargain efforts of the Khatami era and the Geneva Channel of the 9/11 era, sporadic and sluggish. When U.S. policymakers intervened to quash efforts at ending confrontation with Tehran, Ghazvinian highlights their connections to Tel Aviv: conservatives leery of Iran in the administration of George W. Bush, he notes, were all known for their "close links with Israel" (427).

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Iranian agency in the crisis, the United States played an important role. See Stephen L. McFarland, "A Peripheral View of the Origins of the Cold War: The Crises in Iran, 1941-47," *Diplomatic History* 4:4 (1980): 333-351.

Iran's own skeptics and hardliners, though occasionally noted in Ghazvinian's narrative, do not emerge as a particularly coherent group. Ghazvinian positions the regime of the 1990s as representing a "moderate Islam" (422), with a leadership class defined by pragmatism and self-interest. Support for groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip represent a "fairly logical, traditional Iranian deterrent strategy" (395). While this helps correct the frequent mischaracterization of the Islamic Republic as an irrational actor, Ghazvinian downplays the extent of dissent within Iran. He suggests the Green Revolution of 2009 may have been coordinated by Israeli online influencers (492-494), and his narrative of the Trump era, while necessarily brief, makes no mention of the protests and shocking state violence meted out by the Islamic Republic in November 2019.

Ghazvinian's book attempts to solve a mystery—why two nations have remained implacable foes after so many decades. Focusing on Israel as the cause of this state of affairs

offers an answer to this riddle. Yet other answers may lie closer to home. At times Ghazvinian notes the vitriol that frequently pours out on the pages of American newspapers whenever Iran is mentioned. It is common for American journalists, pundits, and politicians to dismiss Iran as "a benighted land of religious orthodoxy and cruel, antidemocratic ayatollahs," missing the diverse nature of Iranian culture and eclecticism within Iranian society (405).

This consistent animosity stems from something deeper than the influence-peddling of a concerned third party and may be linked to the lingering legacy of the hostage crisis, essentialist cultural prejudices in the United States held toward Middle Eastern peoples and Islam in general, or the U.S. security state's preoccupation with Iran as a threat to American national security.

With such a broad mandate, *America and Iran* cannot hope to address all these points. It serves as an entertaining and eminently readable account of the long history of U.S.-Iranian relations and a welcome addition to a field that continues to grow, even as the bilateral animosity separating Tehran and Washington remains unchanged.

**Gregory Brew** is a Henry A. Kissinger Visiting Fellow at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. He previously served as deputy managing editor of the *Texas National Security Review* and from 2018 to 2020 was a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University. His work has appeared in *Texas National Security Review*, *Iranian Studies*, and *International History Review*.